

SPEECH ACT THEORY

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LANGUAGE AS ACTION

- Speech Act Theory was developed from the basic belief that language is used **to perform actions**. (meaning and action are related to language)
- **Speech acts** = actions performed via utterances (apology, complaint, compliment, etc.)
- They apply to the speaker's communicative intention in producing an utterance. The speaker - expects that his/her communicative intention will be recognized by the hearer.
- Both speaker and hearer are usually helped in this process by the context = **speech events**.

DECLARATIONS AND PERFORMATIVES

- a class of highly ritualistic utterances which carry no information about the world outside language at all because they refer to themselves.
(SAYING=DOING)

E.g.:

- *a. I swear to... .*
- *b. I sentence you to death.*
- *c. I hereby open the Theater House.*
- *d. I hereby name this ship 'Aurora'.*

1. explicit performative:

- *I order you to clean your boots.*

2. implicit performative:

Clean your boots!

- The assumption is that underlying every utterance (U) there is a clause containing a performative verb (Vp) which makes the function explicit.

I (hereby) Vp you (that)

- the subject must be first person sg., + the adverb 'hereby', indicating that the utterance **counts** as an action by being uttered + a performative verb in the present tense + indirect object

FELICITY CONDITIONS

- for an utterance to perform a certain act, some appropriate conditions have to be fulfilled. Technically, they are called 'felicity conditions'.

FELICITY COND. FOR THE ACT OF ORDERING

- 1. the sender believes the action should be done
- 2. the receiver has the ability to do the action
- 3. the receiver has the obligation to do the action
- 4. the sender has the right to tell the receiver to do the action

EG

- *I think your boots need cleaning, Jones* (Condition 1)
- *I'm bloody sure you can get your boots cleaner than that, Jones!* (Condition 2)
- *You're supposed to come on to parade with clean boots, Jones!* (Condition 3)
- *It's my job to see you've got cleaner boots than this!* (Condition 4)

UNDERLYING FORCE

- 1. **locutionary act:** the basic act of utterance, producing a meaningful linguistic expression.
- 2. **illocutionary act/force:** performed via the communicative force of an utterance, the function that we have in mind when we produce an utterance. We might utter *I've just made some coffee* to make a statement, an offer, an explanation, etc.
- 3. **perlocutionary act/effect:** the effect you intend your utterance to have on the hearer, for example, to get the hearer drink the coffee.

TAXONOMY OF SPEECH ACTS

1. Declarations: speech acts that change the world via their utterance.

2. **Representatives**

- For example,
- statements of fact (*The earth is round*)
- assertions (*Chomsky didn't write about peanuts*)
- descriptions (*It was a sunny day*)

In using a representative, the speaker makes words fit the world (of belief).

3. Expressives: speech acts that state what the speaker feels (psychological states). For example, expressing pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy, sorrow, etc. They can be caused by something the speaker does or the hearer does, but they are about the speaker's experience:

- E.g.
- *a. I'm really sorry.*
- *b. Congratulations!*
- *c. Oh, yes, mummy, great, mmmm!*
- In using expressives the speaker makes the words fit the world (of feeling).

4. Directives: speech acts that speakers use to get someone else do something. They express what the speaker wants. For example, commands, orders, requests, suggestions, etc. and can be positive or negative:

- E.g.
- *a. Gimme a cup of coffee. Make it black.*
- *b. Could you lend me a pen please.*
- *c. Don't touch that.*

In using a directive, the speaker attempts to make the world fit the words (via the hearer).

5. Commissives: speech acts that the speakers use to commit themselves to some future action.).They express what the speaker intends. For example, promises, threats, refusals, pledges and can be performed by the speaker alone or as a member of a group:

- E.g.
- *a. I'll be back.*
- *b. I'm going to get it right next time.*
- *c. We will not do that.*
- In using a commissive, the speaker undertakes to make the world fit the words (via the speaker).

DIRECT & INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

- on the basis of structure, provided by the three basic sentence types in English which relate to the three general communicative functions (Yule, 1996:54):
- Direct/indirect relationship between sentence type & function

Utterance	Sentence type	Comm. function
You wear a seat belt.	Declarative	Statement
Do you wear a seat belt?	Interrogative	Question
Wear a seat belt!	Imperative	Command/Request

TASKS

1. Look at the following utterances and try to determine what might have been their illocutionary force (Source: Cook, 1989):

- 1. Please, open the window.
- 2. It's very stuff in here, isn't it?
- 3. I'm sorry for what I've done.
- 4. I promise to repay you tomorrow.
- 5. Somebody's messed up my computer.

TASKS

2. Look at the following transcripts of exchanges between a husband and a wife. How does A exploit ambiguity in the illocutionary force of what is said? (Source: Cook, 1989)

Exchange 1.

- A: Are you planning to do it this afternoon?
- B: (angrily) Well WHEN this afternoon?
- A: (with injured innocence) I'm just asking whether you'll be able to do it this afternoon.

Exchange 2.

- B: Oh no, we haven't got the TV programme.
- A: Go and get one then.
- B: Go and get one! I've just come in.
- A: Well if you don't go I'll go.
- B: That's blackmail.
- A: It's not blackmail, it's just a FACT.

TASKS

3. What is the problem with the following speech acts. (Source: Mey, 1993:127)

- *I promise (hereby) to set fire to your house.*
- *I hereby warn you that you will be awarded the Nobel prize in literature.*
- *WRNING: Your lawn will turn brown in November*

TASKS

4. Consider the following text, found on a package of American brewers' yeast in the 1920s: (Source: Mey, 1993:127)

- Do not mix the contents of this package with 2 qts of lukewarm water
- Do not add 1 lb of sprouted barley
- Do not put in a warm spot (74 degrees) for 7-10 days
- Do not skim
- Do not put mixture in copper pot and heat
- Do not condense vapors
- Do not consume end product
- Do not get caught